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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#) [RU](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA RESPONDS TO KOSOVO'S INDEPENDENCE

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: Following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence on February 17, most Georgian leaders, from President Saakashvili to the Patriarch, stated publicly that Kosovo does not constitute a precedent that can be followed by other breakaway regions, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. All voices warned Moscow against taking advantage of the situation in the conflict regions. No public calls were made to recognize Kosovo's independence. The opposition demanded the government not recognize Kosovo, adding this item to other demands on the government. FM David Bakradze advised the Ambassador that Georgia fears Russia may begin a "devastating creeping annexation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One hour after Secretary Rice's press release from the Department on February 18, Embassy Tbilisi released its statement on Kosovo. End Summary.

Kosovo no Precedent, Russia Warned

12. (U) Georgian leaders were united in opposing Kosovo as a precedent for recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence:

-- President Saakashvili stated that he will give an "active response" to any steps toward recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence following the situation in Kosovo. He said, "I want our people and the international community to understand that we have the power" to respond to any such recognition in this context. Saakashvili continued, "We shall eradicate any provocation, therefore we do not advise anyone to exacerbate relations with us in the issue of Georgian territorial integrity. We want to resolve all issues peacefully -- we do not need any unrest now -- but Georgia will not step back."

-- In a sermon on February 17, Patriarch Ilia II of the Georgian Orthodox Church slammed Russia's rhetoric regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He said, "Everyone in Georgia is united on this issue. Georgia has been and should remain a unified state. I have told the Russian authorities several times that separatism is like a transmittable disease and everyone should remember this."

-- Speaker of the Parliament Nino Burjanadze said that Kosovo cannot serve as a precedent for the Georgian conflict areas, because "there was ethnic cleansing and genocide in Kosovo." Any comparison is "groundless and unacceptable." She added that Russia should be aware that its actions would backfire, damaging its own interests.

-- On February 18, MP Giga Bokeria, an influential Saakashvili insider, said "Georgia has no plans to recognize Kosovo's independence." Senior MPs from the majority party concurred with Bokeria's statement.

Opposition Calls for No Recognition

¶3. (U) The United National Council of Opposition (UNC), and the opposition New Rightists and Labor parties, also jointly demanded the government refuse to recognize Kosovo's independence on February 18. UNC leader Levan Gachechiladze said Georgian recognition of Kosovo's independence "would be disastrous for Georgia." This consensus view was added to 17 other pending UNC demands of the government (regarding parliamentary elections), driving this issue into internal Georgian politics. The UNC also said that should the U.S. request Georgia recognize Kosovo in exchange for Georgia's membership in NATO, the request should be denied. UNC leader Kakha Kukava said Abkhazia and South Ossetia are "priceless." He continued, "If Russia recognizes Abkhazia's independence, hostilities will start in Georgia as well. It makes no difference who will be the first to start."

FM Bakradze and Ambassador Speak

¶4. (C) On February 18, the Ambassador spoke with FM David Bakradze and told him Embassy Tbilisi would issue a statement following Secretary Rice's statement on Kosovo. In light of Russian comments regarding their relations with the conflict regions, Bakradze told the Ambassador that Georgia fears Russia may begin a "creeping annexation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Bakradze said this approach would avoid an immediate Russian "blowup" with the West and Georgia, but it could be "equally devastating for Georgia."

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Embassy Tbilisi Statement on Kosovo

¶5. (U) At local time 2145, approximately one hour after Secretary Rice's statement on Kosovo was released, Embassy

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Tbilisi released the following Statement on Kosovo:

Today the United States recognized the independence of Kosovo. The United States has long held that each separatist conflict anywhere in the world is unique. Indeed, the situation in Kosovo is a special case and does not serve as a precedent for other regions, including the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia.

The unusual combination of factors involved in Kosovo includes a specific UN Security Council Resolution envisioning a status process and an extended period of transitional UN administration. UNSC Resolution 1244 was intended to help determine Kosovo's future status through a political process that contemplated the possibility of independence. This makes the Kosovo case fundamentally different from all other existing cases.

In sharp contrast, UN Security Council Resolutions on Georgia that have been issued on a regular basis since 1993, including most recently UNSCR 1781 of October 2007, reaffirm the commitment of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, and all Security Council members to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. The United States reasserts the importance of resolving the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts through peaceful negotiations and within a unified Georgia in accordance with the above principles.

In the wake of these latest developments in Kosovo, we call

on all members of the international community to avoid any public statements that could undermine the chances for peaceful, negotiated settlements of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Any attempt to resolve these conflicts other than through a negotiated compromise risks undermining peace and stability throughout the Caucasus. Instead, we urge all state to reaffirm their support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, consistent with the repeated resolutions of the UN Security Council.

TEFFT